

Extra Everything — A Speculative Identity

We are thrilled with the invitation to give you this short explanation to the speculative “identity” which we’ve created for Extra City. As Mihnea Mircan writes in his text about the show, the identity is “uncommissioned.” This means at least two things:

- That Extra City, an arts centre in Antwerp, did not ask for it and quite possibly doesn’t need it.
- That Extra City did not pose conditions on the outcome.

It should therefore be clear that the responsibility for what is presented here is ours alone. There was no brief.

As the designers of all kinds of graphic products, and as theorists who are trying to patch the political gap in the practice of branding and corporate identity, we believe that identity offers a useful platform to speculate about the world. Of course here is the immediate trap — presented by the concept of “identity.” Did “identity” exist from the beginning, or was it designed, created, then falsely believed to be foundational? For designers, the answer clearly is the latter, although they will rarely if ever admit so.

As a summary, a nucleus, of social practice, “identity” by definition exists as a phenomenon of reduction and exaggeration, two apparently contradictory methods that operate in close tandem. Usually, at first, what is found to be somehow characteristic of what the assignment pertains to, is drastically simplified. Then, it is exaggerated, enlarged, blown up, inflated. If you happen to sometimes, among other colors, have liked the color blue, then you will be branded as unambiguously and completely blue; and so on. The underlying “validity” of this practice is entirely embedded in the type of social wisdom that says things like “birds of a feather flock together” — truisms of the type which have gained remarkable popularity among social scientists and behavioral economists recently.

However, the reason we appreciate “identity” is for its capacity to mirror and to de-essentialize the thing represented. It may well be that Coca Cola is the world’s best known brand, but who really cares? That means much less for the types of organizations that have identities but are not Coca Cola. The potential for such actors, inherently non-global in their outreach, is in their capacity to be the mirrors of their surroundings, and the narrators of their time.

We are all to some extent consumers of history; we are all to some extent bound to read, rather than be read. Why spend time creating the unique when the non-unique, the seemingly commonplace, and the obvious are readily available for inspection and offer themselves in huge quantities for re-application?

The idea is that “brands” which do not have a brand could, rather than submit to the illusion of total identity (a Dutch dream), or retreating into its very Belgian parallel, the non-identity, use the surface that they create and the information space they account for to “narrate” their context rather than only themselves. Space taken up by pseudo-originary forms and shapes supposedly rendering an organization visible amidst a firestorm of signs and signals, would be much better used if organizations dared not to be original — instead, re-narrating the stories in which they and their audience live. There are too many actors to remember; too many unique stories to even follow.

Assigning an identity, in this view, is less an act of translating and mediating the inner self of an organization, or overwriting it with a single color, than it is a surface or screen by which an organization mirrors its surroundings, both in the physical space

as well as in information space. This is not the same as simply imitating. Today, visual culture is exchanged almost on a single surface — the hitherto separated sub-economies of commerce, pop, government, and the culture and art world, coexist on the same plane, are randomly collapsed on the Internet. This reality makes it legitimate for the identity of an arts institution to be constructed out of elements that do not themselves refer to art, but instead point at the (hostile) world in which art must exist. As objects and subjects leave their respective walled gardens, the neutrality of the arts institution is undermined. The Belgian artist Marcel Broodthaers once presented empty eggshells and mussels as poetic vessels, and as suggestive metaphors for the role of art and the art institution, an approach that seems to echo strongly within the spaces of Extra City where multiple frames were built that function as symbolic, but open, containers for an open-ended message. However, it seems that the approach Broodthaers took to art and the institution has in recent years almost reversed, and not art institutions, but their surroundings, appear like empty eggshells — even, broken ones.

Nowhere in Western Europe is this development as apparent as in Belgium, where a record-breaking inability to form a coalition government, and open speculation on the break-up of the state into smaller constituencies, routinely make the headlines and have considerable influence on the Belgian “brand image.” There is something about these developments that seems to completely escape the retroguard. The state is mistrusted across the board, yet only in Belgium there is the categorical (and useful) separation between government and public sector, as in having a public sector without a government, an acting body without a head.

The political reality behind this stalemate is not as joyful; myriad strands of right wing populism have taken over the rudder from the former extreme right by which the latter’s main stumbling block — being associated with racism and fascism — has been removed.

Extra Everything reflects the Belgian political context by means of hyperbolic exaggeration and the interplay of visual archetypes. This happens in two ways. First, by the coupling of the institution name Extra City to the framework of a famous Flemish comic book series, Suske & Wiske — whose creator came from the area in which the Extra City building is located. Second, by the expansion of the word “Extra” to cover other concepts than that of City. From a design perspective it is exactly the word “Extra” as it sits in Extra City, that unlocks the potential to expand the identity. So the proposal does start from an essential part of the institution: its name. The Malinese graffiti from which the Extra City name was purportedly derived, constitutes an ‘ad hoc’ ground for the institution, but it is a ground, nevertheless. Then, the piece is speculative — it is a proposition; it reflects Metahaven’s vision on “a” possible Extra City future (and not “the one” possible Extra City future). The proposal does not reflect Extra City’s view of itself. In a conventional, client-based commission process, such a ‘pure’ position is filtered by a stated programme of demands known to client and designer before the process begins. It should be admitted that the piece we are showing here has only come to life after a fierce debate with this exhibition’s curator, Mihnea Mircan, the director of Extra City, who “uncommissioned” it.

Extra Everything is a long way from becoming a functioning letterhead or an invitation card, but it might help framing or directing a discussion on what institutions should and shouldn’t publicly aspire to in uncertain times as these.